The Botanic Garden of Smith College (including the Lyman Conservatory and outdoor arboretum) mainly houses plants for the “instruction of Smith students in the plant sciences: botany, horticulture, plant physiology, ecology, systematics, and pharmacognosy” and is available to horticulturalists and researchers internationally. The collection has also supplied plant material for scientists working to cure cancer and aids, researchers developing pharmaceuticals, and geneticists seeking to learn about evolution in plants. Yet in addition to its many practical, scientific uses, the conservatory is a site for artistic observation and aesthetic appeasement. Thus, what is the relationship between the orderly, useful scientific purpose of many of these plants and the aesthetic, artistic value of such specimens? In a society that is so focused on output, efficiency, and purpose, (not only in science but in society in general), what is the role of the visual in the pursuit of mechanized, standardized, “high modernist” order?

While the Smith College Botanic Garden only represents a small microcosm of the meeting of the useful and the visual, it provides a metaphor for the larger issue that society is currently (and has been for years) attempting to resolve both consciously and unconsciously. In agriculture, architecture, and countless other forums, use, function, and productivity are the foremost concerns of planners. Aesthetics are often forgotten for favor of these concerns (or productivity is compromised for aesthetics), yet visual pleasure is necessary for the appeasement of the human mind and spirit. Additionally, the obsession with productivity, science, and function can lead to destruction and can ironically impair productivity in the long-term.

This phenomenon is particularly evidenced by the “production and profit” and “maximization of the crop yield and profit” mindsets used in modern agriculture as tight, unnatural rows of crops and monocropping (in addition to not being aesthetically pleasing) have destroyed soil. The sole focus on furthering society and productivity can also be seen with quick-fix repairs and patch jobs in construction, and even short-term houses and cars that are built quickly and without aesthetic and then last only a few years. While productivity, shelter, and saving money are all arguably very different goals than the intent of scientific research and teaching instruction of the Smith Botanic Garden, the general themes of “usefulness” and “efficiency” provide a common ground. The Botanic Garden, with both its internal and external components, is a unique example of a solution to the balancing of science and aesthetics, as it is “a collection of plants that are scientifically ordered and maintained, documented, and labeled, for public education, research, conservation, and enjoyment.” The Garden successfully melds use and aesthetic appeal in both the Lyman Conservatory and the outdoor spaces, suggesting that there is room for the visual in a high modernist society. In fact, visually appeasing and slightly less efficient endeavors can often be more productive overall and in the long-term than solely use-driven endeavors.

Inside the Conservatory in the Palm House, plants of the tropical rainforest weave, slither, and twist with abandon. Scientifically structured in layers to mimic a natural rainforest (though incorporating species from around the world as opposed to from one particular region), the room is a planned, scientific experiment. Herbaceous plants and small shrubs cover the ground, with smaller stunted trees, a tall canopy, and emergents jutting up above. Lattices support vine growth, and numbered audio posts stick out of pots and are attached to trees. Many

---

3 Ibid., “Lyman Conservatory.”
specimens are growing out of containers—their roots clearly isolated, possibly to prevent contamination and to allow for easy studying and observation. Banana, mahogany, cacao, rubber, bamboo, and cinnamon, all economic commodities (though not being grown for usage in this ease) are present. Plastic and metal nametags are attached in some way to every specimen, projecting the Latin name, English name, country of origin, and family of each plant. A large sign introduces the viewers to the room and provides information about a true rainforest environment; a paved path weaves through the room to a bench for viewing; the walls, stairs, doors, and ceiling glaringly remind visitors that they are in a manufactured and man-made environment.

Yet despite the scientific undertones, the “man-made experiment” is undeniably beautiful. Textures abound: fuzzy, spiky, and waxy. The trees are invasive, dangling, creepy-crawly; gazing up at the tall trunks conjures feelings of the sublime. The intense heat of the room, combined with the exotic smell and darkening overhang of the canopy overshadows the abundance of signs, the paved path, and the walls. While the room would likely be more scientifically useful if all of the plants were potted, labeled, and completely separated in rows in a brightly lit space, and would likely be more aesthetically pleasing if the signs, pots, lattices, and audio posts were removed, the compromise allows for a space that is both visually pleasing and useful in the “high modernist” agenda for the research, science, and progressive society.

Similarly, the outdoor area reconciles use and aesthetic. While all specimens are labeled, concrete, gravel, and grass paths wind through the garden, and the area is surrounded by a fence, the mixture of different forms—the hard and soft lines, plants both erect and weeping, the juxtaposition of exotic plants with plants that are commonly seen in New England (such as pachysandra) is very aesthetically pleasing. The casual order is beautiful. The plants are
organized in plots by family, and the plots are not in rows but rather organic ovular shapes, dispersed across the grass. The time of year my visit yielded very few colorful plants in bloom, yet the brown stems and hardy, green survivors provided an array of textures. These textures, mixed with the crisp fall air and curled, browning, crunchy leaves created a calming scene. A metal bird statue and concrete flower-holders add manufactured aesthetic beauty, a dynamic that was not present indoors yet suggesting that manufactured items can be visually pleasing as well. Therefore the possible beauty in man-made items—and can provides a case for the incorporation of the visual into modern buildings and cities as some (certainly not all) are built quickly and cheaply at the expense of artistic design.

The reconciliation of the scientific use and aesthetic beauty in the Smith Botanic Garden indicates that there is a place and a need (and I would argue a need) for aesthetics and the visual in a society that is so concerned with efficiency and productivity. Ultimately, it appears that finances are the driving forces behind both the high modernist agenda and the dismissal or inclusion glossing over of the visual. Yet arguably, slightly compromising productivity and “usefulness” (which is not always even necessary) to incorporate some visual pleasure is typically healthier and better overall for society. Productivity is beneficial in the sense that it creates more, whether it be more “stuff,” more research, or more living space. As quantity and speed increase, in most cases quality inevitably appears to decrease, such as with the development of the “supermarket tomato” which had fewer nutrients than a normal tomato.4 “Quick fixes,” mass produced goods, and “cheap” items certainly have their place; thus, high modernists need not completely alter their ways, but rather act in a manner that incorporates the visual (which is often nature) and strongly considers the long-term effects of the crazed efficiency.

4 Ibid., Scott, 267.
Correspondence with Abbey:

Email 1:
Hey there!
Overall, I was very impressed with your paragraphs. Below are my positive and negative reactions. Hope it goes well! Let me know if you have any questions or need clarification.

Abbey

INTRO:

Positive: Informed. You clearly laid out information about the gardens and their scientific purpose (international scientists and curing cancer and the like). I like how you structured it by addressing the scientific purpose and then the aesthetic appeal, ending with a question about the relationship between the two.

Negative: Jarred. If that’s a word. You, know like jarring? I think that the first sentence in particular, with its use of both parentheses and a quote is difficult to navigate. So, too, for some reason, the use of the word “thus” as you introduce your question is a bit startling. Just a side note, your second set of parentheses reads “not only in science but in society in general.” You’ve already made it clear that you’re talking about society, so maybe you could just say “not only in science” so as not to be repetitive.

CONCLUSION:

Positive: Impressed. I really like the way you went with the argument and the sources you decided to use. Comparing the dismissal of visual aspects in favor of productivity with the supermarket tomato and the gardens to society as whole renders your argument persuasive in both its originality and relatability.

Negative: Unconvinced. I’m not sure if that’s the right word, but I just think if you displayed more confidence in your argument that the reader would be more persuaded. For example, the first sentence includes a set of parentheses that reads “And I would argue a need.” If you included it in your sentence and eliminated the “I would argue” so that the sentence would read, “The reconciliation of the scientific use and aesthetic beauty in the Smith Botanic Garden indicates that there is a place and a need for aesthetics and the visual in a society that is so concerned with efficiency and productivity.” Also, the heavy use of parentheses in general is a bit distracting, so maybe you could find a way to incorporate or eliminate those thoughts.

Email 2:
Hi Abbey,

Here are my comments and reactions. Hope they help! Good luck with your paper.

Lindsay

Introduction:
Positive-Intrigued and Soothed
Your thesis is clear and the opening language is very eloquent and soothing. I love the descriptions and comparisons between the inside and outside spaces. You also have a logical progression from introducing the two rooms to saying they have purposes to saying what those purposes are. Very solid overall.

Negative-Worried
I'm not sure that worried is exactly the right word, but I would say that maybe just be careful with your opening language. While I really like it and understand what is going on because I know what the assignment is, an outside reader could be confused what the inside/outside spaces are, where they are, etc. Perhaps you could briefly mention Smith and the botanical gardens in one sentence before your thesis just so people would know. At the same time, you could also do this (and you may already) in the second paragraph of your essay.

Conclusion:
Positive-Fulfilled
It is clear that the body of your essay not only supported your thesis, but also went a step further and moved to assert that the mum show was more effective at educating than the outside area. Also, the last sentence is successful because you relate your argument to teachers and education in general--a nice way to tie everything together.

Negative-Curious
In your conclusion you mention that the inside and outside spaces "balance out each other's weaknesses." This is a very interesting idea, yet what does it mean/what can you conclude about it? If you already talked about it earlier in your essay, never mind, but otherwise it would be nice to elaborate and explain how/why this is true. Left on its own it is a very interesting point, but I feel a little bit like I'm left hanging as opposed to everything being tied totally together.

Email 3:

Hey Lindsay!

Thanks so much for your kind and constructive comments. In my intro, I will add some reference to the Smith botanical gardens so as to ground the reader. And you're right, the idea of the two spaces balancing each other out is something that could be further explored. Thanks so much for your helpful feedback!
Abbey

**Email 4:**

Hi Abbey,

Thanks for your help! I will definitely try to cut down on the parentheses as I know I use them too much, and I will fix the second set of them in the introduction so as not to be repetitive. Additionally, I will try to be more convincing with my arguments in the conclusion... I think part of the problem is that I possibly haven't totally worked them out yet, and it shows with the "as I would argue a need" and other instances.

Good luck with your work!

Thanks,

Lindsay

**Correspondence with Kevin:**

**Email 1:**

Hey Kevin,

Here are my comments. Let me know if you have any questions. Good luck!

Lindsay

**Introduction:**

Positive-Intrigued

I like the way you compare the two rooms without directly saying what they are in your first two sentences, and I think the parallel sentence structure is very soothing and successful (the one. . .other and first. . .latter (though I think you should say either former/latter or first/second)). It is intriguing because it is slightly confusing. . .I was eager to keep reading to find out what you were comparing.

Negative-Confused

I'm not sure exactly where you are going with your essay, because the last sentence (your thesis I presume?) contains a lot of information and you have lots of things going on--are you saying that despite the differences in appearance, they have the same purpose (education and appreciation)? Also, you mention the mention of the French and English styles. . . is that something you are going to explicate during your essay? Otherwise it is just a bit distracting/confusing from your main point. Maybe you could mention it in an earlier sentence.

**Conclusion:**

Positive-Impressed
I am impressed with the claim that the differences between the two gardens makes them similar. It is very bold, and I feel like you are taking a risk there...which is a good thing.

Negative-Wondering
It seems as though you concluded two things:

1. The Show Room defies the English style of gardening in the Rock garden
2. The differences between the two gardens cause a connection between the two

I am left wondering how you came to these conclusions, because I'm not sure how they relate exactly to your thesis. It is interesting on the one hand because you likely had a lot of movement in the body paragraphs because I did not see these themes in your intro, but also concerning because it is also possible that I just do not understand your argument. Maybe just try to clarify exactly what you are trying to accomplish in the intro, and then the conclusion will make more sense.

Email 2:
Lindsay, Here are my responses to your paragraphs. Let me know if you need clarification.

Kevin

Intro:

Positive: Hooked. The last two sentences at the end of your introduction not only made it clear as to what you would be talking about but the way in which you formed them as a question is an interesting method and definitely makes me want to read on to see how you answered them.

Negative: unsatisfied. I would only change a few things. Some of your word choice becomes a little repetitive when you use artistic and aesthetic a couple times in the paragraph. Also maybe condensing some of the lists in your sentences might help to make your points more concise.

Conclusion:

Positive: Impressed with your ability to connect your arguments to the reading in regards to the “supermarket tomato”. It made it easy to tie it all together with an example so concrete.

Negative: Annoyed. I feel like you are over using the parenthesis and quotations in your conclusion. With so many in every sentence, these techniques become distracting and your conclusion longer than it may need to be.

Email 3:
Hey Kevin,

Thanks for your suggestions. I will definitely look to get rid of a lot of the parentheses (Abbey mentioned them too) and I will also try to change some of my word choice so that things are
more clear. Additionally, I will condense the lists--I can totally see how they would be confusing.

Thanks for your help, and good luck with your paper!